

## The Mustard Seed

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The mustard seed and leaven parables have been the twin parables for misinterpretation over the centuries. Both have been presented as good growth for the kingdom of God in the history of the Christian church, however, with a critical analysis and proper exegetical process. This has proven to be not natural but unnatural growth. This paper will examine the parable of the mustard seed, its definition, meaning, lessons, historical misinterpretations, and the benefits of understanding parables.

“He put another parable before them, saying, “The Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”<sup>1</sup> When the text says it becomes a tree, some commentaries state the word tree is a hyperbole because of its size. The New King James Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, commenting on the Parable of the Mustard Seed, states that while scholars do not all agree about which plant is in view here, ancient sources describe the mustard seed as proverbially small. At the same time, opinions about its size and height differ. However, it evokes the image of a great Kingdom of old that God's Kingdom would supplant. The glorious future Kingdom was already active in a hidden way in Jesus' ministry.

The parable that follows the mustard seed is the parable on leaven. Some authors call them sandwich parables because they are placed between recital and explanation of the previous parables. This parable in this text is left without interpretation. As a result, these parables have suffered misinterpretation. In *All the Parables of the Bible*, Dr. Herbert Lockyer explained; the Lord was not illustrating the true nature of His Kingdom. This parable is not

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:31-32 (English Standard Version).

forecasting the amazing growth of the Kingdom. But it is about the abnormal and unnatural extension of the nominal Church.<sup>2</sup> According to the synoptic gospel, from the introductory phrase, "the kingdom of God is like," or equivalent wording. The most often cited of these is the parable of the Mustard Seed, which begins in Mark (4:30-32), "How shall we liken the kingdom of God, or in what parable shall we set it forth? It is like a grain of mustard seed," etc. Luke (13:18 f.) has practically the same wording, as Matthew (13:31 f.). The likeness of the Kingdom to the seed is thus clearly stated by all three, and is naturally always made the norm of the exegesis of the parable.<sup>3</sup>

"The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."<sup>4</sup> Here in Luke, it appears Jesus is alluding to our faith to start as the mustard seed, start small, but grow. However, when the apostles heard this statement from Jesus initially, there is the possibility that they interpreted that statement as them not having faith and not necessarily the growth of the Kingdom. Today, the interpretation is more concerned with the negative growth of the Kingdom than "having little faith." Jesus used the mustard seed as a metaphor to teach the apostles about faith. The parables of Jesus contain a prophetic element. The apostles understood what He was saying in their time, but there is an element of that parable to be unfolded later. The Church began after this parable was given.

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963) 184-185.

<sup>3</sup> Clayton R. Bowen, "The Kingdom and the Mustard Seed." *The American Journal of Theology* 22, no. 4 (1918): 564, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3155328>.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 17:5-6

Richard N. Longenecker, in the *Challenge of Jesus Parables*, stated the parable of the mustard seed and the leaven are two tersely worded parables that are paired. For not only do they both are rather surprising metaphors in their highlighting something significant regarding the Kingdom of God, but they also present a balance of a man planting a mustard seed and a woman mixing leaven. Both parables speak of God in terms of its growth and development.<sup>5</sup> And he said, "With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." With many such parables, He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples, he explained everything.<sup>6</sup> The NKJV of the Bible, in verse 32, uses the word Herbs instead of plants.

### **What is the Mustard Seed?**

According to the commentary in the ESV Study Bible on Matthew 13:31-32, the mustard seed is an annual herb (*Brassica nigra*) that is very common around the sea of Galilee and areas further North. It can grow to over 6 feet tall, with a single thick stem and many branches in the upper part of the plant. In the springtime, its bright yellow flowers dominate the landscape. The plant was used for oil and medicine in Biblical times. Its small seed is not the smallest seed known, but it certainly provides a suitable contrast with the size of the grown plant.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 137.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 4:30-34

Here we have the definition of the natural plant, giving us the possibility that when Jesus gave this parable, he was alluding to this plant. Is it not a possibility in the first century, this was the smallest seed known? Dr. J. Vernon McGee, in his commentary on the Mustard Seed, said." A liberal preacher discovered the mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds, and he thought he had found an error in the Bible. But Jesus was speaking to a people at his time, and the smallest seed they knew was the mustard seed. But when it's grown, it can become the greatest among herbs."<sup>7</sup>

### **What is the Meaning of this Parable? What are the Lessons here for us?**

Expositors err in using this botanical detail to announce the rapid spread of the gospel and the expansion of Christianity worldwide. The organized Church, instead of sowing seeds, is sowing trees. The great ecclesiastical systems and great religious – Political Rome is not a vision of Christ's Church. Birds are presented in Scripture numerous times in a negative way,<sup>8</sup> such as, Abraham in Genesis 15:11. In *the challenge of Jesus's Parables*, Longenecker, quoted Daniel 4:20-22 to demonstrate the negative growth of the mustard seed within the Kingdom. The text in Daniel is verbatim with the text in Matthew. "The main point of this parable is about contrast rather than growth. The kingdom of God has humble beginnings, did not overwhelm the world in its coming, and can easily be overlooked."<sup>9</sup> In *the Parables of The Gospel* John Drury notes, "The features of the parables which transcend the bounds of actuality, and are meant to tell us that we have to do with divine realities. As the absurdity holds, so does the apocalyptic vision.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, vol. 4, Matthew through Romans (Nashville: TN, Thomas Nelson, 1983), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Lockyer, 187.

<sup>9</sup> Longenecker, 114.

Here is an image of the eschatological state or Kingdom, a tree full of birds."<sup>10</sup> In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you! —and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you."<sup>11</sup> "Like fleeing birds, like a scattered nest, so are the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon."<sup>12</sup> "And exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."<sup>13</sup>

The unnatural growth of the Kingdom is demonstrated in Scripture. For the Scripture states on the day of reckoning, the Lord will say to those who proclaim they have done miracles and other great work in your name, He will say to them depart from me I never knew you. We have a pattern in the parable of the dragnet. When the net comes to the shore, the fishermen will separate the good fish and throw back what does not belong. But they all come together in the net. In *the Bible Exposition Commentary* by Warren W. Wiersbe, Jesus explained this parable in His explanation of others: "The birds in the Parable of the Sower represented Satan, and passages like Daniel 4:12 and Ezekiel 17:23, indicate that a tree is used as a symbol of world power. These facts suggest that the parable teaches an abnormal growth of the Kingdom, which makes it possible for Satan to work in it. The mustard Seed illustrates the false outward expansion of the Kingdom."<sup>14</sup> Some religious groups try to make Christianity a world organization with political influences. Today, we are witnessing the Russian Orthodox Church under the power of Putin. With all these political images, we see the Church divided into political camps here in America. We can make the inference of the Mustard Seed. Satan has

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<sup>10</sup> John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (New York: NY, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 40:19.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 16:2.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 1:23.

<sup>14</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1, An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire "BE" Series* (Wheaton: IL, Victor Brooks, 1989), 46.

been working hard to influence the Kingdom of God since the Church started on the Day of Pentecost. And various subtle means will be used to compromise the principles of the true Church. We will have to embattle hypocrisy and false doctrine.

In the Parable of the Sower, the birds and fowls of the air came and took away the seed that fell by the wayside. Jesus gave the interpretation in (verses 18-19.) In *Sowing to the Spirit*, W.A. Willis writes, the significance of the Birds represents the evil one working to snatch the Word before it can take root. Those who do not belong to the Kingdom seek lodging wherever because they are flying around. The field represents the world (1. John 5:9). The mustard seed is planted in a hostile environment, where Satan governs everything."<sup>15</sup> Here in this parable, we have the reference to a tree, plant, or shrub. As a tree, we have the symbol of a tree in the Garden of Eden that represents righteousness. It is so pure and holy and in the will of God that birds cannot dwell on it. Even though from then, the evil one tried to corrupt it. We hope that after escaping the corruption of this world, with the birds lodging on the branches of the Mustard tree, we will have access to the Tree of Life because of our Savior, who was hanged on a tree for our sins. In Proverbs 3:18, we have the Tree of life as representing wisdom. In Isaiah 11, the prophet presented the coming Savior as one who is coming as a shoot that will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from His roots will bear fruit. He is also referred to as the Branch my Servant. Genesis 3:6-13 describes man in his natural state after he sinned and was turned away from the Tree of life in the Garden of Eden, and an angel with a flaming sword was appointed to guard the garden to prevent intruders from the Tree of life. Today we have the Holy Spirit to guide us back to the Tree of Life through the cross. The author of *Sowing to the*

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<sup>15</sup> W. A. Willis, *Sowing to the Spirit. The Parables of Matthew 13* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2021), 18-20.

Spirit cited the statement which said; "The kingdom teaching means we are to retake the Kingdom of this world for Christ, and there are seven mountains of global society to take, they are; Media, Governments, Education, Economy, Religion, Entertainment and Family. This teaching is very deceptive because the gospel is not involved in this process."<sup>16</sup>

Interpreting the facts of Scripture teaches us to be very careful with interpreting the parables, as we see the various ways in which trees and branches are used in Scripture to represent different things in the context of the subject matter. We can conclude that there is a pattern in that whatever God chooses to use for a good symbol is most times counterfeited or used for evil purposes. We can see that in what the Rainbow is used for today. There is the true Church, and there will be a false Church. There is a good tree that represents the righteousness of God, and there will be one that presents itself as righteousness. God has a son, the evil one will have a son. The scholars quoted in this article have different perspectives. However, they all agree on the following:

- The mustard tree, plant, or shrub represents negativity.
- It is a representation of a political world power without Christ
- The birds represent the working of Satan with its various system represented by the branches
- The growth is unnatural, and those do not represent the true spirituality of the Kingdom.

Luke 17: 20-21 states. "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, Lo there! For, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you." In his book

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<sup>16</sup> Willis, 23-24.

Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Tares, Parable of the Mustard Seed, Hyuna Jang stated, "The Parable shows a contrast between trees and seed. No true image in the world can carry the immortality and greatness of the eternal Kingdom. The world is full of prideful trees that have enjoyed receiving glory. God hates these proud, overgrown trees. He chooses a seed to hide his glory and knowledge, and His seed shed His glory in His incarnation."<sup>17</sup>

### **Historical Misinterpretations**

Annot describes the parable as "The progress of the Kingdom under the idea of a living growth." Lange writes, "The grain of mustard seed—so small and despised in the outward appearance of Him who bore the appearance of a servant, or rather, in that of his Disciples—shoots up, and the smallest of seeds grow into a huge bark, so even to resemble a tree. But as a consequence of this very growth, the birds of the air mistake the bark for a tree and seek to make a lodgment in its branches." Alford. "We must beware of imagining that the outward church forms in this Kingdom... the parable reveals the inherent self-developing power of the Kingdom of Heaven as a seed containing the principle of expansion- the penetrating of the whole mass of humanity, by degrees, by the influence of the Spirit of God."<sup>18</sup> The late Dr. J. Vernon McGee, once in teaching, said anyone who wants to teach the parables should show they have read it about fifty times and study it just as long before teaching it for the first time.

### **Benefits of Understanding Parables**

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<sup>17</sup> Hyuna Jang, *Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Tares, Parable of the Mustard Seed* (North Haven: CT, 2023), 76.

<sup>18</sup> Lockyer, 185.

Some benefits of understanding parables are to reveal truths in interesting forms and create more interest, to make known new truths to interested hearers, to make known mysteries by comparisons with things already known to conceal the truth from disinterested hearers and rebels at heart, to add truth to those who love it and want more of it, to take away from those who hate it and do not want it, and to fulfill prophecy.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Steven Notley, in a lecture at Alliance University in his class on Parables, February-March 2023, stated; Parables were meant to reveal, inform, and enlighten. Never to conceal or hide the truth. And the parables of Jesus come with a moral lesson. In Matthew's gospel, the disciples asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables? He answered, because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them, it was not given. For whoever has, to him, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore, I speak to them in parables because seeing, they do not see, and hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. Parables vary in their use of metaphors, word pictures, objects, and actions. They have different levels of meaning. They draw from human experience. Some of the themes are; The Kingdom of God, Relationship with God, Right Behavior, the time of the end, and Jesus speaking about Himself. Jesus met the parables among the Rabbis before and at His time, but He revolutionized them with his unique style and kept the tradition of his era.

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<sup>19</sup> Lockyer, 18.



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